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THE ESCAPE OF ROSE FROM THE ALAMO.¹

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I wish to say something in self-defense and for the truth of history, concerning my published account of the escape of a man whose name was Rose from the Alamo, March 3, 1836. The occasion of what I have to say is that I have been reliably informed that my account of that escape has been contradicted. I have not seen any published contradiction of it by any reliable authority, neither do I know of any reliable person who has publicly contradicted it; yet I am led to believe that such contradictions, though unreliable, have made an impression upon the minds of some well meaning persons. Therefore I feel called upon to present the case more fully.

¹Read at the annual reunion of the Texas Veterans and the Daughters of the Republic at Austin, April 22, 1901.

Among the details of the defense of the Alamo, as it is frequently described, is a speech by Travis in which he tells his companions how desperate their case is, and/at the conclusion of which he draws a line on the ground with his sword, and asks all who are willing to stay and die with him to cross it and stand beside him. The authority for this is the story told by Rose to the parents of Captain Zuber, repeated by them to himself, and first published by him in *The Texas Almanac* for 1873.—EDITOR QUARTERLY.

It should be remembered that I learned the facts, though second-hand, from Rose himself. He recited them to my parents, who, in turn, recited them to me.

I must admit that, after years of reflection, I arrived at the opinion that in my first writing on this subject as published in Richardson's *Texas Almanac* for 1873 I erred in stating Rose's service in the French army; and I wish to explain how I did so. My father was then afflicted with deafness, and was very liable to misunderstand many things that were told to him. Learning that Rose had served in Napoleon Bonaparte's army, he understood him to say that he had served under that general in Italy, as well as in Russia, and so I then stated; but my mother, whose hearing was unimpaired, did not hear him say that he had served in Italy, though she did hear him say that he had served in the invasion of Russia, and on the retreat from Moscow. On later reflection, I infer that my father was mistaken regarding the service in Italy. Remembering his habits, I now believe that Rose told him something which he had learned of the Italian campaign, and my father inferred that he had served in it also. I also believe that I would have done better to omit Rose's estimate of the number of slain Mexicans that he saw near the Alamo, when he looked down upon them from the top of the wall. Of course, being horrified at the hopeless condition of the garrison, as Travis had just explained it, he saw what appeared to him a great number, and he had no leisure even to *think* of counting them. He only said that they *seemed to be so many*. The rest of his statement was all repeated to me by my mother, and I vouch for its correctness. In my account of this escape in Mrs. Pennybacker's *History for Schools*, I have made the needed corrections, and I affirm that I believe my entire statement in that excellent little book to be correct.

Now, were I to admit Rose's entire statement to be false, yet I would contend that no person is now able to disprove it. The Alamo was not in 1836, as now, in the heart of the city of San Antonio, but a considerable distance from it. The town then covered about one-half of the peninsula formed by the horseshoelike bend of the San Antonio river; and that the west end of it was farthest from the fort, while the east end, next the fort, was uninhabited and covered by a dense mesquite thicket, which obstructed the view between the town and the fort. The view between the

fort and the small suburb of Laveleta was likewise obstructed. This was the situation when I explored part of the ground in 1842. During the siege, though the people in the town heard the reports of fire-arms, as used by the besiegers and the besieged, none of them could see what was done about the fort without needlessly risking their own lives, which they probably had no inclination to do. The men in the fort (all but Rose), were killed, none surviving to tell the story. Mrs. Dickinson and Travis's negro were shut up in rooms, and could not see what was done outside the fort, nor much that was done in it. None of the Mexicans knew all that was done, and the official reports of the Mexican officers were not distinguished for veracity. Then, how can any person at this late period disprove Rose's statement of what occurred about the fort?

I must notice an error which has been thrust into history, which seems to have been relied upon as a disproof of Rose's statement. That is, that, prior to March 3d, 1836, no Mexican soldier had approached within rifle-shot of the Alamo.¹ But both probabilities and facts are against this assertion. We know that Santa Anna, during his Texas campaign in 1836, perpetrated some gross blunders; but, to say that he stormed the Alamo without first having it closely reconnoitered to obtain, so far as practicable, a knowledge of the strength of its walls and of the condition of its defenders would be to accuse him of incredible stupidity, and to say that he delayed doing so till after the ninth day of the siege would be an accusation to the same effect. To my mind, it would be clear without positive evidence that, for this purpose, before the ninth day he sent scouting parties even to the ditches which surrounded the walls. As such approaches *could not be* made in daylight, they were of course made in the night, when but few persons even in the Mexican army were aware of them, excepting those who participated in them. And, of course, the watchful inmates must have slain a large number of those who thus approached.

But we are not without positive evidence that such approaches were made. At least, I have it. Colonel Travis had not leisure to write everything in his dispatches, and of course he sent out as couriers some of his most reliable men, who would state facts and

¹Rose asserted in the story of his escape that when he left the Alamo he saw numbers of dead Mexicans lying near the walls.—EDITOR QUARTERLY.

nothing else. His last courier, sent out on March 3d, 1836, who arrived at Washington-on-the-Brazos on the morning of March 6th, stated to members of the Convention then sitting in Washington, that the enemy had more than once approached to the walls of the fort. Of course, I infer that the courier meant that they approached to the brinks of the ditches which were as near toward the walls as they could proceed. On the next day, March 7th, Dr. Anson Jones, afterward President of the Republic, passed through Washington, halting there; and several members of the Convention repeated to him what the courier had told them of such approaches. On the night of the same day, Dr. Jones arrived at the residence of Mr. A. D. Kennard, Sr., twenty-three miles east-northeast of Washington, and stayed there till after breakfast on the next morning, March 8th, 1836, when he repeated to several other gentlemen what had been told by the courier to members of the Convention, and by them to him, of several approaches by the enemy to the walls of the Alamo. He did not say how often they had approached, but his expression was "more than once." Dr. Jones does not tell this in his *Republic of Texas*; nevertheless, I was then at Mr. Kennard's, en route, as I thought, for the Alamo, and I heard him repeat this statement.¹ Thus we have excellent positive evidence that, before the 3d of March, 1836, some Mexican soldiers did, more than once, approach within rifle-shot of the Alamo, and nearer than that.

Rose left the Alamo on the afternoon of March 3d, and historians say that the courier, Captain Smith, left on the *night* of the 3d. If it were certain that Smith left on the night *following* the 3d after Rose left, this would prove Rose's statement to be false; for Smith said nothing of Travis's speech. But Smith certainly left before that night. I have no doubt that he left on the 3d, and in the night; but his departure evidently was on the *morning* of the 3d, between midnight and daybreak—say, soon after midnight.

¹During many years I was ignorant of the identity of this courier, but I have learned from Bancroft's history that he was Capt. John W. Smith (Bancroft's *North Mexican States and Texas*, Vol. II, p. 213, foot note 26). It was this same Capt. John W. Smith who piloted Capt. Albert Martin's company into the Alamo on the night of March 1, 1836. (*Ibid.*, p. 209.) His bearing Travis's last dispatch preserved his life. He was an honorable citizen of San Antonio, and represented Bexar district in the Texas Senate in 1842.

He could not have escaped the vigilance of the Mexican guards earlier than about midnight, as they were on strict watch for men from the Alamo. But suppose he left about midnight *following* the 3d. Then he would have, at most, three days in which to ride to Washington, where he arrived on the morning of the 6th. The distance from San Antonio to Washington was one hundred and eighty miles, and to cover this distance in three days would have required him to go sixty miles per day; but he could not have ridden at that rate during three successive days, without great danger of breaking down his horse. Suppose, however, that he left soon after midnight on the *morning* of the 3d. This would give him *four* days in which to ride the one hundred and eighty miles; that is, forty-five miles per day, which is reasonable. So I opine that Smith certainly left before the delivery of Travis's speech.¹

I have now to refer to a striking instance of interpolation in a history by an officious publisher or printer. I have no doubt that the historian Thrall was a truthful and conscientious gentleman, but evidently he sometimes relied too much upon his memory in stating historical facts; and his publisher or printer added to his mistakes. This is demonstrated in a passage, in which it is said:

"Travis now despaired of succor; and, according to an account published in 1860, by a Mr. Rose, announced to his companions their desperate situation. After declaring his determination to sell his life as dearly as possible, and drawing a line with his sword, Travis exhorted all who were willing to fight with him to form on the line. With one exception, all fell into the ranks; and even Bowie, who was dying with the consumption, had his cot carried to the line. The man who declined to enter the ranks that night made his escape. [This tale is incredible, since he reported large pools of blood in the ditch, close to the wall, when no Mexican had then approached within rifle shot.]"²

This passage is evidently the work of more than one writer. Had its authors *intended* to embrace as many errors as possible

¹In the letter carried by Smith Travis says, "Col. J. B. Bonham * * * got in this morning at eleven o'clock." See Foote's *Texas and the Texans*, II, 220.—EDITOR QUARTERLY.

²Thrall's *History of Texas*, p. 242.

within a given space, they could scarcely have crowded more into a paragraph of the same length. The statement referred to was not published in 1860, nor by a Mr. Rose. The man who declined "to enter the ranks" (that is, to cross the line) did not wait till that night to make his escape. That statement did not mention a ditch. And Mexican soldiers had, more than once, "approached within rifle-shot" of the fort, and nearer than that. Rose was the author of that statement, which he made orally, but not its writer or publisher; moreover, it was not written till 1871, and it was first published in Richardson's *Texas Almanac* for 1873.

But Mr. Thrall is responsible for only the first three errors, to wit: those relative to the date and publisher of the statement and the time of the man's escape. These are comparatively unimportant.

The last three errors are between brackets, showing that, without authority from Mr. Thrall, they are interpolated by the publisher or printer. They are the assertion that Rose's statement "is incredible"; the allusion to a ditch; and the assumption that "no Mexican had then approached within rifle-shot." It is fortunate for Mr. Thrall that the authors of these eccentricities relieved him of the responsibility for them, by inserting them between brackets.

Mr. Thrall himself, in effect, gave full credit to Rose's statement, as is evidenced by a passage in his biography of Col. James Bowie, the facts of which he could have obtained from no other source than Rose's statement, as first published by me. In it he says:

"During the siege, when Travis demanded that all who were willing to die with him defending the place should rally under a flag by his side, every man but one promptly took his place, and Bowie, who was sick in bed, had his cot carried to the designated spot."¹

But even here is an instance of our historian's too great reliance upon his memory, though the mistake is in a mere want of precision. Travis requested all his comrades who would stay with him and die fighting not to "rally under a flag by his side," but to step across a line which he had drawn with his sword.

It may be thought that, under such excitement as Rose must

¹Thrall's *History of Texas*, p. 506.

have suffered before leaving the Alamo, his memory must have been blunted. On other subjects, it may have been blunted; but, as to the substance of Travis's speech, which he afterwards repeated in his manner, the excitement only sharpened his memory. That speech was a sudden revelation to him, and every idea expressed thereby sank deep into his soul and stamped its impression there.

With the explanations already given, it does seem to me that, without further comment, every item in Rose's narrative ought to be accepted as quite reasonable and credible; but, as some persons seem determined to discredit it, and I know not what points may yet be assailed, I prefer to subject it to a severe sifting.

Rose was in the Alamo a short time before it fell. While the mass of his contemporaries lived, this was acknowledged even by those who affected to discredit the rest of his statement, and none but two unnamed tramps are known to have asserted otherwise. In evidence of this fact, and of the consequent inference that he was one of the men who perished in that fort, his name was on the first partial list of those heroes, including only seventeen, which was published soon after the fall of the Alamo, in the *Telegraph and Texas Register*, at San Felipe. It was also on the more extensive list in Richardson's *Texas Almanac* for 1860, on page 82; and it has been further recognized by the inscription of his name on two Alamo monuments, one of which yet stands; that is, the one in the porch of the old capitol at Austin, which was destroyed by fire in 1881, and the present one in front of the new capitol. In the three lists first mentioned, the Christian name is omitted. The two printed lists named him as "—— Rose, Texas," that is, of Texas; and on the destroyed monument it was simply "—— Rose." Yet, no one who knew the author of the narrative under consideration doubted that he was the man referred to, and I am sure that he was the only Rose in the Alamo. On the new monument now standing, the name is inscribed "Rose, J. M.," for J. M. Rose. It is on the fourth pillar, the first name after that of David Crockett.¹ I understood his name to be Moses Rose; but by whom or why the "J" is now prefixed is unknown to me. I know that he was generally understood to be in the Alamo when last heard of before its fall. However, he was not one of the heroes who died

¹See Scarff's *A Comprehensive History of Texas*, Vol. I, p. 710.

in defense of that fortress, and his name ought to be erased from the monument.

Colonel Travis was known to be an apt extemporaneous speaker; and I judge that all who knew him believed that, if any man could, under the trying circumstances, deliver such a speech as Rose affirmed that he delivered in the Alamo on March 3d, 1836, Travis was the man. I do not doubt that, to one unaware of the known facts, it would seem a high pitch of absurdity to believe that, under such circumstances, any man could deliver such a speech. Yet it would seem more absurd to believe that one hundred and eighty men would stay in a fort, and die fighting in its defense, rather than surrender or retreat; yet more absurd that they would die without first mutually pledging their honor to do so; and equally absurd that any orator could, by a speech, induce them so to pledge themselves. But it would be far more absurd to believe that they would make this pledge without being induced to do so by such a speech. Nevertheless, we know that, whether such an appeal was made to them or not, and whether they so pledged themselves or not, they did stay, fight, and die. Knowing this, we must pronounce Rose's account of that speech and of that mutual pledge reasonable and credible.

Is it incredible that, when all the other men in that little garrison covenanted to stay there and fight to the death, Rose alone declined to do so, and resolved on an attempt to escape? I believe that a majority of men will admit that, if similarly situated, they might do as Rose professes to have done. Is it incredible that, to disencumber himself for descending from the top of the wall on the outside, he threw down his wallet of clothes, which fell into a puddle of blood, part of which adhered to some of his garments, and on drying glued them together? My mother saw her black servant-girl, Maria, take those garments out of the wallet and find them so glued. On leaving the fort, he did not attempt to go east through the Mexican army, by which he would have been killed or captured, but went west, through San Antonio; then south, down the San Antonio river, about three miles; then east, through the open prairie, to the Guadalupe river, carefully avoiding roads after leaving San Antonio, from fear of encountering Mexican scouts. Is this incredible? Any prudent man would have traveled the same route. Is it incredible that he saw no person in San

Antonio; but, so far as he saw, all doors in the town were closed? The danger of the time was sufficient to cause the people of the town to keep themselves shut up in their houses. Is it incredible that, after leaving San Antonio, he saw no person till after crossing the Colorado, and only one family at home between the Colorado and the Brazos? His road down the San Antonio river did not then lead by any residence; nor did it till more than six years later. There were then no residences between San Antonio and the Guadalupe excepting a few ranches on the Cibolo, and avoiding roads he passed between these. All families on the Guadalupe had left on the "Runaway Scrape" excepting those of De Leon's Colony, which was below his route, and the people of Gonzales, which was above it.¹ After resting three days on the Guadalupe, and proceeding slowly, on account of his lameness, to the Colorado, he arrived at that river after nearly all the people between it and the Brazos had left home; and only one family remained on his route between those two rivers. I could name that family; but, for personal reasons, I prefer not to do so unless it shall become necessary. Is it incredible that, in his haste to get away from danger, he traveled all the first night out, but was bewildered and made but little progress? Is it incredible that, in his attempt to travel during that night, his legs were gored by hundreds of the large cactus thorns which abound in that region? Is it incredible that he did not take leisure to relieve himself of them till they had worked so deep into his flesh that he could not bear the pain of drawing them out? My parents drew those thorns from his legs with nippers. Is it incredible that he crossed rivers by rolling seasoned logs into the streams, seating himself upon them, and paddling across with his hands? Other men who could not swim have done so, and why not he? Is it incredible that, after traveling two days without food and being hungry, sore, lame, and weary, he rested three days at an abandoned house at which he found plenty of provisions? Is it incredible that he rested during some time with the only family that he found at home west of the Brazos? Is it incredible that two unknown men, professing to live in Nacogdoches, spent a night with that family, and, when about

¹Our little army was then meeting at Gonzales, and for the time protecting that town.

to leave, drew the landlord out where Rose could not hear them and told him that they knew Rose to be an impostor, who had never seen the Alamo, and advised him to send him away immediately? The landlord told many persons that they did so. It is not incredible that honorable men residing at Nacogdoches would then be traveling in that abandoned region, from which the Texas army was retreating, and to which the Mexican army was advancing. Had their purpose been, as they professed, to confer a favor upon the landlord, they would have tendered their advice in Rose's presence. What could they have intended? The only conceivable object was to gain the landlord's favor, and thereby to save their bill for accommodations. Is it incredible that the landlord did as those tramps advised him to do? It is surprising, yet true. He, as well as Rose, said that he did so; and he said so boastingly to many persons. Is it incredible that a man of very tender sensibility was so wounded and discouraged by such treatment that he resolved never again to say that he had been in the Alamo? Such a resolve was foolish, and injurious to himself, yet he said that he had made it, and I believe that generally he had stood to it. Is it not most probable that his subsequent reticence on this subject was what prevented his statement from being inserted in the early histories of Texas? Is it incredible that, his rash resolve notwithstanding, when he found friends who had seen his name on a partial list of the heroes of the Alamo, who believed his report, and who kindly ministered to his affliction, he, at their request, narrated to them his escape and journey to their residence? Finally, is it incredible that, yielding to their importunities, he repeated his story to them till they knew it by heart?

Now, I have directed attention to about all the notable items of Rose's narrative. And when they are compared, which one of them is absurd or incredible? To my mind, every statement therein is reasonable and credible; yet to some minds his story may seem too much like truth to be accepted as such.

My writing down of Rose's narrative was incidental to a more important purpose, which was to preserve the substance of Colonel Travis's speech to his fellow-heroes of the Alamo, on March 3d, 1836. Rose's disconnected recitals of that speech, my mother's repetition of them to me, and my many rewritings of the same, by which I compiled the disconnected parts into a connected dis-

course, all are explained in my account of the adventures of Rose, in the revised edition of Mrs. Pennybacker's *History of Texas for Schools*, pp. 183-188, especially pp. 187-188. The speech itself, as compiled by me, fills a foot-note in the same book, pp. 139-140. The first issue of the revised edition contains one misprint, p. 139, which has been corrected in subsequent issues. It represents Travis as saying that the enemy outnumbered the defenders "two to one." The correction is "twenty to one."

Now, I think I have fully explained this affair; and what is the conclusion? One of two hypotheses is evidently a fact. Rose's statement is either true or false. If it be false, who fabricated it? The guilt would rest upon one of three persons; that is, upon Rose, upon my mother, or upon myself. Rose, being illiterate, could not possibly have manufactured what is represented to be Travis's speech. I do not believe that my mother could have done so, if she would; and I am sure that she would not. I do not know that I could have done so, if I would, and I would not have perpetrated such a fraud,—to save my own life. My sole purpose was to perpetuate the memory of what I knew to be of great historical importance; that is, the substance of Colonel Travis's speech to his comrades in the Alamo, and to show how I learned it. If I have succeeded, I have done well; and, if I have failed, I enjoy the consolation of knowing that my failure is in a just and truthful cause. If the present generation and posterity refuse to do me justice, God will award it to me in the day of final account. But I am not distressingly anxious for what the world may say about my veracity, for I believe that my reputation as a truthful man is well established; and, even should I be mistaken on this point, I have a clear conscience, and this is better than all things else on earth.